Conference on 'Challenges for Foreign Ministries: Managing Diplomatic Networks and Optimising Value' May 31-June 1, 2006, Geneva

Summary of discussion

The DiploFoundation hosted a two-day international conference on the theme 'Challenges for Foreign Ministries: Managing Diplomatic Networks and Optimising Value' in Geneva, on May 31-June 1, 2006; it drew 70 participants from 40 countries, 30 foreign ministries were represented; a total of 24 papers were presented in 9 sessions. The Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, co-sponsored the conference.

Principal Challenges

Foreign ministries around the world are actively engaged in a complex process of change and adaptation to an international environment that is volatile and unpredictable. At home, like other public services, diplomatic establishments face the paradox of high public expectations and diminishing resources. They have to sustain and redefine their competence among competing official agencies active on the external canvas, as have the multiple new domestic non-state stakeholders that have carved out their legitimate roles. Put another way, the MFA is at the meeting point of the international diplomatic network and the national diplomatic system; it is the interplay between these two roles that lies at the crux.

The foreign ministry is defined by its organization culture. Though a ministry may seldom think in these terms, the basic questions it might pose itself are: Who are we? Are we important in what we do? What are the problems we confront? How are we changing?

Some notable trends: the desk officers remain a pivot of the system, with responsibilities that have changed, but not reduced; at middle levels (e.g. country directors) there is a reduction in importance, though it is early to tell if this represents a de-layering process; some foreign ministries are shifting to functional or thematic units, in lieu of territorial units (e.g. Canada, UK); diplomats need to learn to deal with other professional cultures and with multiple stakeholders; consular diplomacy has gained salience, leading inter alia to more intensive use of honorary consuls (Russia now runs a network of honorary consuls, having abandoned past inhibitions). In some countries external affairs issues are being shifted to the intelligence agencies.

Foreign ministry personnel face new work demands resulting from more intensive integration with domestic policy; in most Western countries they also confront staff cuts. In contrast, the embassy, while tasked more intensively than before, often has a wider range of expertise available to it, adding to its role in the development of analysis; in some countries the expanded role of embassies in the policy formulation process is explicitly recognized (Canada, Germany, UK). Some believe this is essential to safeguard the 'entrepreneurial spirit' of embassies; they need 'small pockets of money' to undertake effective activities under their own initiative. The head of mission is viewed as the key integrator of the diplomatic process.

Are foreign ministries taking on too much by taking on roles in public diplomacy, culture and aid management? Should they go back to the core, and assign higher priority to political diplomacy? On balance this does not appear feasible, but the issue underscores the importance of work prioritization.

In the opinion of some observers foreign ministry personnel confront angst over their expanded roles, where they must do more with less by way of resources. A contrary view holds that the bulk of medium and small powers do not question the role and value of the foreign ministry.

Some small foreign ministries have shown themselves to be supple, adapting well to the environment, while the tradition-bound tend to waste effort on turf battle with domestic agencies. Foreign ministries in developed countries generally confront shrinking budgets and staff cuts; they must do more with fewer resources. Ministries that do not face this problem are perhaps enjoying a grace period; it is wise to get one's act together before public service cuts bite in.

Some Experiences

Participants were near unanimous in their conviction that professional diplomats have no choice but to learn to work with multiple partners, especially of the non-state variety, both abroad and at home. Many believe that networking is one of the key requirements of diplomacy in our times, and that this involves the creation of 'constituencies of practice'. Linked with this is the building and sustaining the home support base for the country's diplomacy.

The US is currently focussed on 'transformational diplomacy, aimed at supporting 'democratic, well-governed states that conduct themselves responsibly in the international system'. In practical terms this means greater concentration on the emerging states. This includes practical measures such as switching resources to the new work priority areas, and establishing stripped-down outposts, such as 'virtual presence posts', concentrating on local outreach and contact-building, getting people out of static embassy positions.

Thailand has developed the concept of the 'CEO ambassador', where the envoy acts as the coordinator of all external representation; it aims to place the envoy in charge of a unified budget for external activity, commencing with an experiment that is to cover about ten embassies. This, and the 'Team Thailand' initiative is part of its public service reforms, aimed at making the country's diplomacy people-centric, while at the same time improving proficiency and efficiency.

Sweden is tackling the modernization process in its foreign ministry, seeking to inculcate competence for the management of change. This involves improving both the external and the internal focus of the diplomatic system, and improving leadership for change. It has about a dozen home-based ambassadors who work on specific themes; it has also developed 'regional embassies' that act as support bases for a network of smaller missions. It believes that there is no one single model that applies in all situations.

Malaysia, which hosted the major series of summits in December, including the ASEAN + 3 summit, followed by the East Asian Summit, is considering outsourcing some of the peripheral functions of the foreign ministry. It believes that typically up to half of MFA personnel may be engaged in activities that can safely be outsourced.

A view was expressed that with sound planning, it is feasible for foreign ministries to survive budget cuts and even thrive in such situations. The key lies in eliminating activities that are not needed, and retaining a tight grip on time management. The diplomatic inspector has a responsibility in monitoring the working of the system. Considerable knowledge resides within the system, and this has to be 'mined' and managed in a smart fashion. Some countries have begun to charge their commercial enterprises for the services provided by embassies.

The Domestic Dimension

Modern diplomats need to understand how much domestic politics has become part of the diplomatic process. Put another way, multi-stakeholder diplomacy is the activity, gaining in prominence, where diplomacy confronts domestic politics.

Economic diplomacy is a case in point: it is increasingly a shared task, involving joint actions by state and local governments, working together with other national and international actors. The state plays a catalytic role, and it needs 'smart' methods to work effectively in the new context. The economic diplomacy model must also include the NGOs; another new development is the emergence of regulatory diplomacy.

A linkage exists between diplomacy and politics at three levels: the relationship between the diplomat and the politician at home; between the diplomat and foreign politicians; and between the politicians of two countries. We need deeper analysis of these relationships. The fact that the foreign ministry has at its disposal both its own envoy in the foreign country and the foreign envoy accredited to its own capital,, creates a situation that resembles the 'double-entry bookkeeping system'; this permits the foreign ministry to check and verify the messages received and sent in both directions; and, in some ways it also creates a second source to re-confirm one's assessments.

Belgium offers a unique model of sub-state arrangements in foreign affairs, to the point where observers call it 'a permanent diplomatic conference'. The Belgian regions have the latitude to send their representatives to both bilateral and multilateral posts; the basic premise is that if a regional government has a competence internally, it can also develop that competence abroad. A kind of Flemish 'foreign ministry' is under development, while the Belgian foreign ministry no longer uses that nomenclature and calls itself a 'public service'.

Russia provides a unique example of sub-state diplomacy, thanks to its constitution that permits its 8 regions and 89 'subjects' to engage in some diplomatic activities of their own, a legacy of the former Soviet Union. The Foreign Ministry has a special department that monitors this process; the question of appointing MFA representatives to the regions is under examination.

The Belgian and the Russian cases are instances of sub-state diplomatic management, a subject that calls for greater study, at a time when devolution and disintermediation are gaining in importance in different countries.

Multilateral Diplomacy

Has multilateral diplomacy (MLD) evolved sufficiently in consonance with changes in global politics? One view was that MLD is in deep crisis, also reflected in the impasse over UN reform. Outside the UN, groups ranging from the G-8 to the World Economic Forum are increasingly important, and the numbers of actors that are 'legitimized' to play their roles in the global arena have also grown. Some held that the crisis faced by the UN has its origin in the membership of this world body. One of the hard choices faced by member-states is between that which is right and that which is easy.

The internet, which developed outside the control of governments, has thrown up the amorphous but highly articulate 'internet community'. The Internet Governance Forum, which emerged from the 2005 WSIS-II Tunis Conference, could establish a precedent in international cooperation. The World Trade Organization (WTO) where different stakeholders are increasingly playing a role is perhaps another instance of the world community moving towards a new form of MLD.

Human Resources and Training

A survey of the recruitment and training carried out by Ambassador Rolando Stein, Director General of the Chilean Diplomatic Academy, in which 80 countries responded to a questionnaire, showed that in all countries the intake of diplomat-level officials is highly selective; the success ratio among applicants varies between one in 100-125 (Australia, Brazil, Thailand, UK), to one in 5000 (Bangladesh). Other findings: 66% of the selection processes

favour personality traits over academic performance; this profession is unique in its domestic and international dimensions, with certain ethical and behaviour principles respected within the international community, despite societal and cultural differences; diplomatic academies need to cooperate more intensively than they have hitherto, despite the existence of the Vienna-based Forum of Academies; one trend is the emergence of regional cooperation.

Participants felt strongly that traditional training methods are no longer enough, especially to cope with a rapidly changing environment of world politics. The growth areas in training include crisis management, consular affairs and public diplomacy; 'active learning' methods now dominate, consisting of simulations and role-playing, replacing the lecture format. Local staff have to be included in training programs, which must also reach out to the other constituencies, especially official agencies that lie outside the foreign ministry, non-state actors, sub-state entities, TNCs and others. Defence ministries are generally ahead in training personnel in complex decision-making using computer-based modelling, compared with foreign ministries.

Diplomatic academies need to identify all their clients and potential users, to get them to participate in the setting of training goals. Quality assurance is an essential form of process control, and a new standard, ISO 10015 has emerged as a management tool, to address the outcomes of training. The goal is to identify the performance gap.

Performance Management

In some countries performance management is built from the bottom upwards; the foreign ministry enters into a 'performance agreement' with the head of mission. It may also have a reporting agreement to focus on the subjects that the embassy should work on.

Performance management is first about cost and value, but at a deeper level it addresses the basic goal of the effectiveness of the diplomatic process, in the expectation that this will lead to efficiency. This may be easier to achieve in bilateral than in multilateral diplomacy. Performance reports also become the vehicle for addressing the domestic publics on good governance in external affairs, serving as an instrument of accountability.

Consular Diplomacy

Consular work has ceased, in some respects, to be the 'Cinderella service' as it was sometimes considered in the past; it has gained in visibility and become a benchmark to judge the performance of the foreign ministry. The reputation of the foreign ministry is also now seen to hinge on the quality of services it provides to its citizens in foreign countries. Acts of terrorism, and natural disasters in different parts of the world have raised awareness of the dangers that one's citizens face abroad, while migration issues have also raised the profile of consular diplomacy. Small countries have worked out innovative arrangements to use the embassies of selected partners to provide consular services in countries where they do not have resident missions.

Seen in a pragmatic perspective, consular diplomacy connects the foreign ministry with its home partners, and becomes a barometer of the effectiveness of the MFA. The role and importance of consuls is also changing. Some countries focus on establishing new consulates in preference to opening new embassies. They are also expanding their networks of honorary consuls.

Technology

An example of innovative use of the internet was provided by Canada, which uses its webpages to run forum discussions on selected international policy issues, where students and specialists are invited to post policy analysis and recommendations, which are reviewed by peer groups of

their own, with foreign ministry officials providing their comments. This becomes part of the ministry's domestic outreach, and a process of two-way communication that informs the public and solicits their support for foreign policy. Some other countries have expressed interest in these methods, with the aim of replicating these in their own environment.

Public Diplomacy

The aim of public diplomacy is to create understanding for the home country; it is not a new activity, nor a fad. When assigned abroad, the diplomat is no longer the principal negotiator, nor the key interpreter of home policy. His main business is not so much with the foreign ministry in the receiving country as with the entire political class; he needs a dense and stable network of contacts. Personal communication skills and language ability are vital. In this sense public diplomacy is defined as 'reaching out to people in the host country, connecting with the active public'.

Another view was that public diplomacy as a concept may have passed its high point; the wider question is of operating effectively in public institutions. [Note: Jozef Batora presents a novel definition of public diplomacy as 'the development, maintenance and promotion of a country's soft power' (a concept developed by Joseph Nye); he posits that this necessarily addresses the domestic stakeholders as well as foreign publics.[1] Some may consider this definition to be too broad, since 'soft power', is an all-encompassing term.]

Technology also provides diplomats with the means to remain in effective communication while they are mobile and executing assignments. This facilitates contact with the full range of home authorities, as well as with foreign partners. It effectively alters the way a mission and its officials function in dealing with rapidly changing situations and crises, including emergencies where realtime assistance has to be provided in the field.

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[1] Jozef Batora, 'Public Diplomacy Between Home and Abroad: Norway and Canada' *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol I, No. 1, p. 54.